

COMMON AND LESSER NODDY *ANOUS STOLIDUS*  
AND *A. TENUIROSTRIS* IN SOMALIA

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Except for the large breeding colony of the Common Noddy *Anous stolidus* on Mait Island (11°15'N, 47°15'E) off the northern coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden (North 1946), there would seem to be only four other records of the bird for the whole country. The Lesser Noddy *A. tenuirostris* has never been recorded. Such paucity of records is presumably due to a lack of observation, rather than to a recent change in status of the species, for both are common now.

Britton (1977a) recorded the first Lesser Noddies for African waters as recently as 1976. They were seen in several localities in Kenya between 5 August and 10 December 1976, with as many as 220 in one place. However, in 1977 only two were seen, on 29 July. The same author (Britton 1977b) states that the Common Noddy "may be encountered inshore in Kenya in small numbers at any season".

OBSERVATIONS

Pre-1978 records

Heuglin's visit to Mait Island on 13-15 November 1857 indicated that huge numbers of *A. stolidus* bred there (Heuglin 1869-74); at the time of North's visit on 22-26 November 1942, he was able to say that immense numbers still bred there (North 1946). Ogilvie-Grant & Reid (1901) collected a male at Zeila (11°21'N, 43°28'E) on 3 November 1900, and Archer & Godman (1937) refer to birds at Aibat Island (11°31'N, 43°27'E) and to two records from Bulhar (10°23'N, 44°25'E); all these localities are on Somalia's north coast.

Recent records

I arrived in Mogadishu in mid-August 1978 and travelled frequently along the coast up to 102 km northeast and 40 km southwest. Up to the time of writing in October 1979 I also visited many other coastal areas further to the southwest and in the north. Both species of noddy were plentiful, *A. stolidus* from 30 March to 7 September 1979, and *A. tenuirostris* from 22 September 1978 to 7 September 1979, although the latter was not present throughout the period.

*Anous stolidus*: none was seen until 30 March 1979, when two flew over the dunes at 3 km, and another at 27 km, northeast of Uarscheik (2°18'N, 45°49'E). Following these, a total of 46 was seen on seven days in April, the largest number on one day being 25, from various points along the coast. For much of May I was in the north with J.E. Miskell and A.A. Murshid where we visited Mait Island on 20th. We estimated 20 000 *A. stolidus* concentrated in a band on sloping rocks just above sea-level distributed all round the island, and from 19th-21st there were large numbers feeding just offshore to the east of Mait village (10°58'N, 47°04'E) on the mainland. Back in the Mogadishu area at the end of the month there were 11 birds on three days, then in June there were 22 on four days (maximum 15), until 22nd. On this day, following a week of high winds and rough seas, 28 flew south with *A. tenuirostris* at Hal Hambo (1°54'N, 45°05'E). On 24th a southerly movement of both species included 80 *stolidus* in 2 h at Ras Bagal (1°55'N, 45°09'E). Just northeast of Mogadishu seven flew south on 25th, but on 26th there were noddies flying south all day. Intermittent counts resulted in a total of 236 *stolidus* with larger numbers of *tenuirostris* (*q.v.*), and c. 100 *stolidus* on nearby Buntapsi Island (1°53'N, 45°04'E).

*Scopus* 4: 6-9, March 1980

From this date, onwards through July, the species was abundant up and down the coast, with feeding concentrations of over 1000 birds seen together. Several times up to 400 birds were present on Buntapsi and another small island, Mosque Island (1°55'N, 45°07'E), near Gezira, together with many *tenuirostris* and Roseate Terns *Sterna dougallii*, but it could not be ascertained which species were laying, for the eggs were removed daily by the local people. Numbers were far fewer in August, although there were c. 350 on Buntapsi on 24th. Then in September, after five on 7th, I left for the southern part of the country, where, on a visit to the coast on 19th, many were seen over an island off Ras Kamboni (1°38'S, 41°36'E).

*Anous tenuirostris*: Occurrences were in two periods separated by six months. The first comprised only five birds in September-December, and may have been the tail-end of a larger influx present before I arrived; the second occurred in June-September.

The first bird was an ailing immature almost caught by hand at Mallable (2°12'N, 45°37'E) on 22 September 1978, followed by another immature with a rather paler head at Gezira. Next, another ailing bird was caught and collected much further south at Kismayu (0°22'S, 42°33'E) on 6 October, and finally, an adult and immature were seen together at Mallable on 15 December.

The first arrivals of the second, and much larger influx, were observed on 15 June 1979, when there were three and four in the huge flocks of mixed tern species on beaches at 27 and 40 km north of Uarscheik, after which numbers increased rapidly:

Gezira, 20 June, 27 flying south.

Buntapsi Island, 22 June, 100+, as well as 80 flying south in a ½h watch at Hal Hambo, and others along the coast.

Ras Bagal, 24 June, 186 flew south in 2h.

Mallable, 25 June, four flew south in 2½h.

Hal Hambo, 26 June, 944 counted, including 300 on Buntapsi Island, and the remainder flying south at sea.

Buntapsi Island, 29 June, 400.

Gezira, 8 July, 100s flying south.

Mosque Island, 10 July, 400 noddies, of which at least some were this species.

Thereafter only ten more were seen on five days to 7 September, except for 120 which visited Buntapsi Island on 25 August.

#### DISCUSSION

From the observations presented above it is clear that both Common and Lesser Noddies were present in fairly large numbers off a long stretch of the Somalia coast in 1979. The autumn occurrences of *tenuirostris* between 22 September and 15 December 1978 overlapped the 1976 Kenya dates (5 August to 10 December). However, the 1979 occurrences in June in Somalia are much earlier than the Kenya dates. There are several possible explanations: they may have been associated with the strong southeast winds at that time; they may be of regular annual occurrence, or they may represent part of a regular circular migration which takes them north to the coast of Somalia, from where they reach Kenya a couple of months later on southward migration. The inshore waters of Somalia attract immense numbers of terns, apparently regularly and for most of the year, so that it is quite possible that noddies of both species regularly exploit the same source of food. The actual stretch of coast they utilize may vary from year to year depending upon conditions of wind and food abundance.

Bailey (1971) was impressed by the small numbers of seabirds he saw off the Somali coast, in periods totalling about five weeks in July-September, in the

Somali current in offshore waters. Taking the terns as an example, he recorded only: several Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata*, mainly more than 100 miles (160 km) from land; three groups of Little Terns *S. albifrons* totalling 17 birds, all within 20 miles (30 km) of land; and one Lesser Crested Tern *S. bengalensis*. In inshore waters (i.e. within binocular range of the shore), I have seen very large numbers of terns throughout the year. Tens of thousands may be seen in a day, but identification is frequently difficult owing to their distance off-shore, and an interpretation of the seasonal species composition and movements would require prolonged study, for at least fourteen species are involved.

It is unfortunate that my attempts to protect the colonies of breeding terns in June and July on the two islets, the one near Gezira and the other Buntapsi, were unsuccessful. Possibly, colonies were all of Roseate Terns, but positive proof of breeding was impossible to obtain in the large mixed association of several species of terns. About 600 Roseate Terns were present at each island, together with some White-cheeked *S. repressa*, Lesser Crested, Swift *S. bergii* and Bridled Terns *S. anaethetus*, and there were maximum counts of 400 Common and 300 Lesser Noddies. Thus there was uncertainty about which species were laying; though judging by their behaviour there was a suspicion that both species of noddy may have attempted to breed, or were preparing to breed. The habitat would, however, seem unsuitable for breeding of *tenuirostris*, which is typically a tree-nesting bird. All these terns were perhaps loosely associated with the probable breeding Roseate Terns, in much the same way that large numbers of White-cheeked Terns associate themselves with the many breeding colonies of Little Terns along the Somalia coast. The larger species rests by day and roosts by night with the breeding Little Terns, and will rise up and circle round with them when a colony is disturbed, but much observation has provided no evidence of breeding. Indeed, most of these White-cheeked Terns are immature birds.

Noddies are likely to be confused at a distance only with immature or dark phase skuas *Stercorarius* spp. or immature Sooty Terns. However, the pale wing patches on the skuas are distinctive, and the paler underwings and lower abdomens of the Sooty Terns are apparent in all but very poor light or at extreme range. Separation of the two species of *Anous* may be much more difficult; under conditions of good light, at moderate range and particularly from an elevated viewpoint, such as a cliff or a ship, the differences are obvious. Under other conditions identification becomes easier with experience. Flight characteristics, although not diagnostic, are helpful; *stolidus* is larger, rather more heavily built, and has a 'freer' and more 'casual' flight with longer periods of planing, whereas *tenuirostris* tends to have more rapid wing beats, does less planing and its flight is more direct. Also, *tenuirostris* appears more uniform sooty-brown, while *stolidus* looks browner and usually has a clear indication of two shades of brown on the upperwing, having paler coverts and darker remiges. The notes on identification and the illustrations in Penny (1974) are the best I have seen.

Further observations are required to show whether the above observations are normal annual events in Somalia.

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